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# Retainers of Anarchy: In Conversation with Howie Tsui

Michael Brendan Baker

Sheridan College, [mike.baker@sheridancollege.ca](mailto:mike.baker@sheridancollege.ca)

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# Retainers of Anarchy: In Conversation with Howie Tsui – Mike Baker

Vancouver-based artist Howie Tsui was born in Hong Kong and raised primarily in Thunder Bay, Ontario where he built and maintained connections to Chinese culture through food and popular culture. His work explores questions of identity and national history, among other things, and does so through techniques and imagery that conflates traditional painted scrolls with contemporary forms of illustration like manga. His latest work, *Retainers of Anarchy*, is a multi-disciplinary project — including paperworks, sculpture, built structures, animation, and video — organized around a large-format video projection and an interactive installation component to be exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery in spring 2017. It will be Tsui's first solo museum exhibition and, in terms of its scope, the largest work he has yet produced. The project is a response to a video project commissioned by the Chinese government for the 2010 World Expo that depicts a Song Dynasty festival in a manner that is arguably inauthentic and certainly problematic in terms of its depiction of a cohesive body politic. *Retainers of Anarchy* will use the wuxia genre of martial arts fiction and fantasy, and the real-world setting of the Kowloon Walled City, to examine turmoil, dissent, resistance, and community while exploring Tsui's own relationship with Chinese popular culture and his experience of the dynamic links between mainland China and Hong Kong.



*Image of the artist by Rémi Thériault*

**Michael Brendan Baker:** The scope of this project is far greater than anything you've attempted in the past, so I'd like to begin by asking you a little about your process. Your various works appear to be closely knit, particularly in terms of their thematic interests and the larger conceptual frame you are exploring.

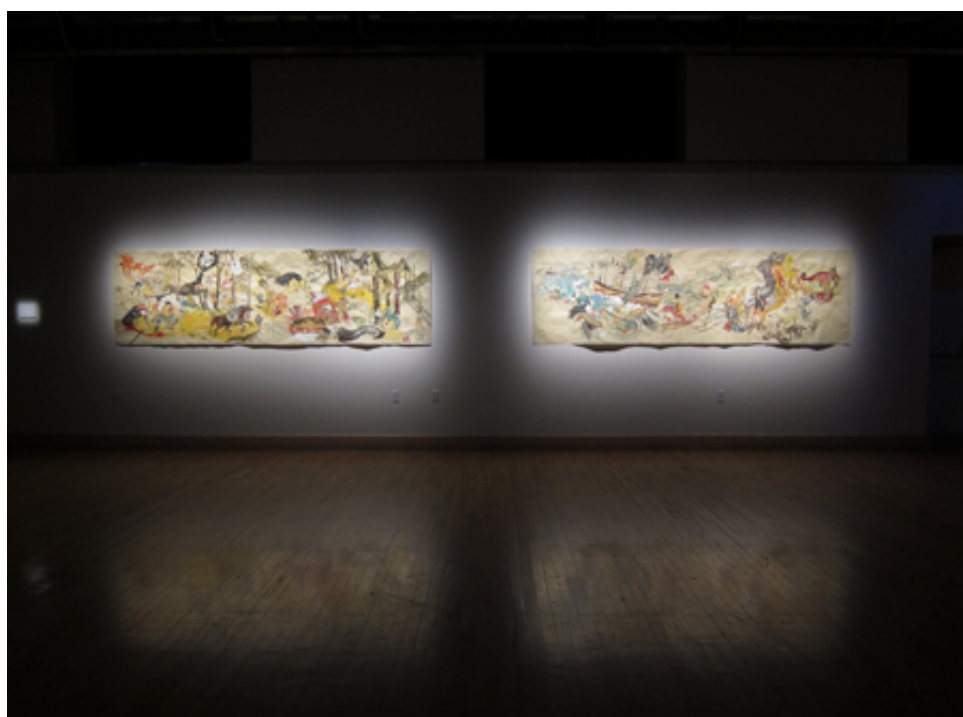
Howie Tsui: It's true, yes, that many of my projects come out of the work that precedes it as I recognize new areas of interest or investigation that I want to delve into. And then it's like a bug — I need to keep it in place while I finish whatever I'm working on. It tends to come about like that, and that's why it likely appears to be knotted together, because they are always inter-related unless they are commissioned pieces for a particular show. When I'm left to myself it's very cohesive because they're all pulled from a single thread of interests.

I think this juggling of ideas and projects is indirectly related to the larger conceptual frame of fluctuating identities or cultures. The feeling of being 'inbetween' whether it's more academic — the split between high- and low-art — it always seems like I'm vacillating between different realms. In previous texts about my work, people speak about "liminal zones" — which was a pretty good catchphrase four years ago — and it's pretty accurate. I feel like I function in this in-between place that affords me a more radial perspective that informs the projects I'm interested in pursuing. In this new project, in particular, because I'm also exploring the *wuxia* genre of martial arts fantasy fiction, the world that it happens in — in Cantonese it's called *gongwu*, which translates as "rivers and lakes" — is a fictitious world that is also in-between, a liminal space that's between reality, history and fiction, like a wild west where you're just out there and not anchored to any particular place. Certainly not a real place. And you're floating, if that makes any sense.

As a first step, I was trying to undermine an animated scroll I saw when I was in Hong Kong in 2010. The Chinese government produced an animated scroll called 'The River of Wisdom' for the World Expo and digital remake of a classic Song Dynasty scroll called *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. When I first saw it, I thought it was cool, just through the scale, but the more I considered it I felt it was necessary to respond to how idealized that world was, so socially harmonious. My practice tends to skewers things in a disobedient way so I wanted to do another version of it which was chaotic and I thought the Kowloon Walled City was a great way of reframing the scroll project within a lawless place.

The irony or paradox is that the Kowloon Walled City was, in fact, a very organized place. Despite the fact it was lawless — beyond the borders of Hong Kong, within the borders of China but ungoverned in a meaningful way — deemed dangerous and hectic but orderly as a result of rules and self-imposed modes of conduct that emerged quite organically. And this mirrors the *gongwu*, these environments in martial arts fantasy fiction, where there is no formal policing and it is left instead to these heroes to maintain order and achieve some sense of social cohesion.

Despite the campy production of some of these films, the themes are communicated quite effectively. The television shows are based on the work of a wuxia author, Jin Yong, who is very popular and responsible for many classics that were quite political and concerned with how these swordsmen are upholding an honourable existence by resisting oppressive forces (which tend to be government officials and others representing dynastic legacies). In some cases, it's very xenophobic, with invading forces set-up as the villains and the ethnic Chinese as the good guys. In terms of the paradox between lawless chaos versus social harmony in an ungoverned state or liminal zone — and its central place in this new project — that came first and then it was structured by my processing all the various elements of the genre.



*Horror Fables (2009)*

**MBB: And what role does collaboration play in this process? How significant is it that you must necessarily hand responsibility for some elements of the work over to others with talents and skill sets you don't possess yourself?**

HT: It is increasingly significant. In the past I've always been obsessive about things in a 'quality control' way and I enjoyed making work that was relatively modest, or not precisely polished, nor fabricated or manufactured by specialists in those fields. But this new work demanded I 'go big' after a while. It was necessary to challenge myself and see if I could navigate it, putting myself within a puzzle and seeing if I could solve it. In terms of resources, at no point in the present moment am I able to say, "Okay, I have enough financial resources to actually pull this off." So that moment is still on the horizon but I initiated the current project at the scale it's at hoping that I could get enough people and support behind it that I could realize it as I envisioned it. And then there's the watered-down version of the project that I might have to capitulate to if I can't find enough funding or creative ways of getting enough help to produce the work. I hope the work is supported to the extent it can be exhibited beyond Canada,

so there can be a little more exposure for Canadian artists abroad, which there is a lack of. Canada is a small enough country population-wise, that we don't have a large enough collector base or vibrant enough art market to support artists internationally on a consistent basis.

Currently, I have two co-op students from Emily Carr's animation program working for me, as well as a graduate who is a really great animator and is serving as the director of the animation component on my behalf. Another professor at Emily Carr, Martin Rose, was my original consultant and has served as my entry into that world. It's cool to see my stuff moving. I produce keyframes outlining a sequence of movements, and then they go through a process of digitizing my work and optimizing it for their own animation methods. I started off providing them with easier characters and movements but now they are getting more complex. One element of their work is creating these shorter loops that can be a part of the projection piece.

**MBB: With this in mind, how easy will it be to transport the work and show it in different venues?**

HT: The project will be transportable — a single high-end PC tower with five projectors — with an installation component that can be reconstructed in various spaces.

The dimensions of the scroll projection are 90 feet high by 10 feet tall, and it will start off as a landscape scroll. But what happens is that the projection will shift and you will see a building representing the Kowloon Walled City, at which point it will zoom in, and I've designed cross-sections — doll house-style — allowing you to look into the building and see all of these scenes animated within the individual rooms.

The installation component — a living room filled with VHS tapes of these films from my youth — is intended to be an honest representation of the source of my relationship to the genre: a basement in Thunder Bay watching all of these kung fu films. My father originally relocated to Canada based on a proposal to establish a videocassette manufacturing company in Thunder Bay, so that's how we got here. That plan didn't last long but it explains why we had so many videotapes at home. Access to cultural products plays a role in connecting the diaspora to one's home countries.

**MBB: For readers who are not familiar with your work or your story, can you briefly describe your development as an artist and the role played by formal education and community engagement?**

HT: For me, undergraduate art school (University of Waterloo) was foundational. When I got out of high school I was in Thunder Bay, and Thunder Bay has a great history of First Nations woodland art but I wasn't exposed to very much contemporary art. I wasn't versed in that world. My initial training wasn't terribly academic, it was technique-driven, but university did provide the more foundational art historical and theoretical concepts that I've since built upon. The most valuable part was just being around other students that were also super interested in making art. Developing a language using visual art happened in art school later on, after I found a crew. We were the low-brow, B-movie, outsider kids and I think if I hadn't been in the program at the same time as those guys, I would have felt pretty alone and might not have wanted to pursue it any further.

I was also lucky to have been mentored as much as I was after arriving in Ottawa. Not in a formal way, but because the community is tight-knit, you see how the few organizations there are operating. You learn from that. The Ottawa Art Gallery was my first job after undergrad and I was just working the front desk, but I got to see the shows that the gallery was putting on. The curator at the time, Emily Falvey, was a very good, heady curator and the themes to her shows were a great balance between pointed, political, and intellectual, but not at all obscure. That rubbed off on me, definitely, and the programming at SAW



Gallery was also very helpful. It was even more forwardly political, and shows were frequently providing voices for more marginalized and disenfranchised sections of society. That was also very influential as my work tends to address similar themes.



*The Unfortunates of D'Arcy (2013)*

**MBB: And the impact of your move to Vancouver upon your work, your understanding of the Canadian art scene — in what ways does Vancouver allow your work to evolve and how has your identity as a Chinese-Canadian artist evolved with increased access to the world of contemporary Chinese art?**

HT: After moving to Vancouver, I noticed there is much more work being produced by many more artists, showing in many more galleries with more funding and a wider range of mandates. There's a lot to see but it's also hard to zero in on things because it's so frenetic, certainly in comparison to Ottawa. I go and check stuff out but I'm certainly less active in Vancouver than Ottawa, and much of that is a consequence of having a two year-old to look after.

I think increasing the role Hong Kong and China plays in my artistic life was always the goal of relocating to Vancouver. I knew Ottawa was a great place to find myself because it wasn't so distracting. I could occupy the silence and figure out what my practice was in an honest way, without being effected by external factors. And I think that helped because once I arrived in Vancouver, I was a semi-established, mid-career artist and I could check-out as much work as I wanted, but I didn't need to feel as though I wasn't part of it, or that my work didn't fit with what the scene was preoccupied with. The whole intention of moving out here was wanting to get back to Hong Kong and Asia more often, and given that my work was exploring these overt cultural references, I wanted to use that, but play with it in a way that would allow me to get over to Asia and present it so people could see what happens when a Chinese diasporic artist is producing work with an eye on returning to the country post-migration. And maybe I would learn more things after returning to Asia and my perception of things would just explode, including my perception of the culture while living in Canada, which was accessed primarily through TV shows and movies.

When I go to mainland China, I am definitely an outsider because I don't speak Mandarin, but when I go to Hong Kong it feels like a homecoming. In terms of how I am positioned as an artist when I'm exhibited, if I'm programmed in shows, I am often a 'Hong Kong-born artist' who is returning to the country. In Hong Kong, Westerners run a lot of the arts organizations and galleries, so it's easy for them to work with Western-trained, Western-schooled artists with a tie to Hong Kong. There are organizations that are reversing that and trying to support straight-up Hong Kong-born local artists, but it's still a developing movement.

In mainland China, it's such a large world over there. In Shanghai, I'm exhibiting at a gallery that is more frequented by ex-pats and western Europeans. A mainland collecting audience isn't really into my work

yet. I think there is a tendency for mainland collectors to invest in mainland art, but there is a new trend — like wine and cheese on the mainland — to collect some non-mainland art. Honestly, I'm not entirely in tune with the art market and how its machinations actually work. I know some colleagues who've found great success after studying at fine arts schools in the United States or Canada, and then returned to Hong Kong and did really well because of the cultural capital — there's a cache attached to Western schooling. The power structure of the art scene is Eurocentric so they put more value in someone educated in a Western context. In Hong Kong, if someone graduated from Goldsmiths or a similar setting, it would look very good regardless of their practice. It's tied-in with the weird relationship between Hong Kong, Britain, and colonialism. Hong Kong'ers have historically looked up to Britain and British culture, and they continue to differentiate themselves from mainlanders in their perception of themselves as more mannered and knowledgeable of etiquette. Mainlanders are viewed as brutish and uncultured.



*Taohua Island (2014)*

**MBB: And what about your own identity as it is defined by your practice? Certain thematic or conceptual preoccupations come in and out of fashion, enjoy greater or less traction in terms of funding and gallery support, and the consistency of your vision could just as often be a liability as something worth celebrating.**

HT: I think it's widely accepted that art focused on identity is out of fashion or gauche. Now it's process-based abstract work. So I'm very self-conscious about my place in the art world. I have another artist friend in town that makes work focused on identity and we have to stay tight so that we aren't shaken by criticism that claim our interests or practices are irrelevant. It's pretty difficult. But that is the area I'm interested in working in, and comments or critiques don't resonate with me, or for a lot of people who are struggling or wrestling with issues of identity.

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***Howie Tsui** Vancouver-based artist Howie Tsui (Tsui Ho Yan / 徐浩恩) was born in Hong Kong and raised in Lagos, Nigeria and Thunder Bay. He holds a BFA (2002) in painting from the University of Waterloo and received the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize (2005) from the Canada Council for most outstanding young artist. His work is in the public collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Canada Council Art Bank, City of Ottawa, Ottawa Art Gallery and Centre d'exposition de Baie-Saint-Paul. Solo exhibitions: Gallery 101, Carleton University Art Gallery, AceArtInc (Winnipeg), Montréal arts interculturels, Centre A (Vancouver), Agnes Etherington Art Centre (Kingston), Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, with group engagements at the West Vancouver Museum, Boston University School of Fine Arts, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Para Site (HK), Art Labor (Shanghai) and*

*the National Gallery of Canada. Upcoming exhibitions: include Oakville Galleries and the Ottawa Art Gallery. <http://www.howietsui.com>*

**Michael Brendan Baker** is Professor of Film Studies in the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences at Sheridan College. He specializes in documentary film and video, music and the moving image, and film history. He holds a PhD in Communication Studies from McGill University, a MA in Cinema Studies from Concordia University, and BA in Film & Video from York University. Over the past several years, Prof. Baker has taught a wide range of film and media courses in schools across Canada including Carleton University and the University of British Columbia. He is author of numerous book chapters and journal articles on a range of subjects including documentary, popular music and film, and new media. Baker is co-editor, with Tom Waugh and Ezra Winton, of “Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada” (McGill-Queen’s, 2010) and sits on the editorial board of the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*. He is presently completing a book manuscript based on his dissertation, “Rockumentary: An Incomplete History of the Popular Music Documentary.”